

Roger T. Macfarlane

Nikos Nikolaides' *Eurydike BA2037* (1975) abides largely unknown as one of the Eurydice myth's most compelling cinematic adaptations nearly fifty years after its making. In the concluding frame Eurydice (Vera Tschekowa) stands alone having wrested control in her underworld domain. Eurydice organizes her solitary dwellingplace as the house she has chosen to occupy in solitude forever. Not to be further inconvenienced by Orpheus' erroneous overreach, she rather contrives for herself control within her own home, a sovereign mansion. The screenwriter and director has created in this Eurydice a remarkable figure, exceptional especially for this impulse in a novel manner to shape her own destiny. This is certainly not the classical Eurydice, i.e. neither Vergil's or Ovid's — those traditional tellings where Orpheus' gut-wrenching error spoils an heroic rescue mission and loses the bride forever. The striking adaptation of Eurydice who eliminates Orpheus through her own powerful will was provocative in post-Junta Greece and articulates an important turningpoint in Neos Hellenikos Kinematographos (NEK = New Greek Cinemamaking or Greek New Wave).

The feminized Eurydice of Nikolaides' cinematic world stands in stark contrast to the women who had typified Greek cinema in the two decades leading to his day. Nikolaides' innovative empowerment of Eurydice is the screenplay's most abiding novelty. The creation of a heroine who takes utter control of her own destiny had not occurred in Greek cinema since Tzavellas' *Antigone* (with Irene Pappas, 1961) before the Junta. Censors and governors during the Junta of the Colonels (1967-1974) had adored the dimpled charm of Aliki Vouyouklaki, sometimes regarded as a Greek Sandra Dee. Although she is probably not singled out per se by Nikolaides as *the* foil for the empowerment of woman in *Eurydike BA2037*, nevertheless, it seems legitimate to see in Nikolaides' film an aggressive critique of that cultural mindset that elevated Vouyouklaki for so long, especially through the patriarchal conservatism of the Junta. (Constantinidis 1-2) Written and filmed in the very season of the Colonels' demise, Nikolaides' screenplay develops Eurydice's character from a trembling recluse who fights to barricade a terrifying outside world and turns her into a dominatrix of space where her hegemony is absolute, a powerful goddess. This is a far cry from Vouyouklaki who had stood in the prime of her career as a "new symbol of identification, the *victim* as a cultural hero (especially the *female victim*), thus reflecting the official version of 'authentic' Greek cultural mentality." (Karalis 135). On the way to dashing her forebears' precedents, Nikolaides' Eurydice undergoes a sexual maturation that culminates in her naughty roleplaying with a pair of anatomically complete talking dolls, symbolically castrating the male — its phallus recurs as a casual trophy in later scenes. In depicted flashbacks the viewer learns that Orpheus has abused his bride in the past. In her empowerment, Eurydice becomes inclined to get even.

Eurydice in this film gets only one glimpse outside her confinement — she sees a young woman in the company of several young men, all in a position superior to her, willfully denying her attempts to join them. The camera cuts between Eurydice's POV watching this wordless failure of the young woman, and to her solitary gaze as she somewhat wistfully observes the distant peer. In her observation of the gender wars outside, roughly half-way through the film, Eurydice is on her way to controlling her destiny.

Nikolaides' *Eurydike* receives recognition now only among deep-digging historians of Greek cinema and is otherwise forgotten. Notably, Michelakis' masterful *Greek Tragedy on Screen* (2013) leaves unclaimed room for this film within the chapter on "Greek mythological narratives as a key for making sense of contemporary history" (151-70). Shuster, Soldatos, and Karalis each mentions Nikolaides' films in their surveys of Greek cinema, but dedicated explication of *Eurydike BA2037* is still unwritten. Perhaps Nikolaides' subsequent films have cast a critical pall of oblivion over his 1975 premier film. The director's sordid filmography is populated with nearly one dozen nightmarish films that portray psychological insanity and sexual depravity that exceed the limits of soft-core pornography.

Nikolaides' premier film received prestigious recognition among contemporaries. Nikolaides' directorial style and compelling screenplay manifest considerable sophistication, even extraordinary novelty. Though other Nikolaides films I have watched — or sampled — are unwatchable, *Eurydike* would likely be rated R by modern boards for its female nudity, portrayal of autoerotic exploration and heterosexual rape, and perceived human disembowelment. Wretching into a toilet hardly puts a film into the R-rating, not even when the vomit goes backwards surreally. *Eurydike BA2037* exhibits many of the motifs and themes that sully his later filmography. Θα Σε Δο Στιν Κολασι, Αγαπη Μου ("See You in

Hell, My Darling", 1999) takes many of the *BA2037* themes and motifs to more distant ends. But *Eurydice*'s bewitching cinematography by George Panousopoulos rolls the mid-70's film back into the height of film noir, (Shuster, 189) a time when films were racy but not sleazy, where the Dinah Shore soundtrack would fit right in.

Eurydice BA2037 plays out almost entirely within a subterranean one-bedroom flat from which the camera peeks out just once and emerges only briefly. The film's action is carried solely upon the acting talents of Tschekowa. With stunning green eyes and an esteemed pedigree, the star-powered Tschekowa in 1975 was over a decade beyond her prestigious German National Film Award (1962) and fifteen years beyond a not-so-dreamy date with America's most famous GI, Elvis Presley, a publicity stunt sprung upon her by surprise (1959). Tschekowa (b. 1940) portrays the character of a maltreated bride convincingly, but her Eurydice is not entirely naive. Tschekowa drives Nikolaides' Eurydice through several costume changes, countless tight facial close-ups, and a nearly dialogue-free script. Tschekowa's Eurydice proves in the end worthy of the tall order, which has her displace an emasculated Orpheus from the innovative adaptation of the myth she now controls.

The film's primary narrative is anything but linear. It is a *ludus interruptus* tour-de-force that is way ahead of its time. Flashbacks and mind-bending visual clues continually fold linear time over upon itself in a down-right novel What-If plot. This narrative strategy now familiar in cinema since *Groundhog Day* (Ramis 1993), *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1999), and others "since the 1980s," films where "we can enjoy the challenge of unpredictable presentations of story events." In such films with What-If plots, "the reordering of events is startling and confusing at first, but [becomes] dramatically effective in the way the[ir] conclusion forces us to rethink events we have seen earlier." (Bordwell & Thompson 87-88) Through this aggressively non-linear narrative, Nikolaides' screenplay bewilders at first but invites rewatching ... and rewards it. Indeed, using the DVD now to skip and revisit the time-bent plot with tech that the director could not have foreseen is probably like cheating in a crossword puzzle. Such rewatching allows the viewer to see how in Eurydice's netherworld the days hellishly fold over upon themselves and the distinction between solitude and recollection is sometimes blurry. Nikolaides' *See You in Hell* postdating *Groundhog Day* by six years bends the timeline unremarkably; but the What-If arrangement of *Eurydice BA2037* scores by anticipating Ramis by a decade.

The film intrigues on that macro-plot level, but also in finer details. For my reckoning, the breathtakingly complex long shot that concludes the film provides the most impressive evidence of Nikolaides' directorial verve. The long "oner" remarkably recapitulates a retrospective on Eurydice's emotional journey and establishes her dominion in this realm. Nikolaides achieves here a directorial highpoint. The film's narrative has been anything but linear, but the last shot of the film imposes linearity as it recaps the development of the protagonist. Through the final single long-shot, we realize that Eurydice is finally free and, having eliminated her rescuer, she will resolutely keep things thus. Hardly as lengthy as exempla in contemporary filmmakers, Nikolaides' 156-second sequence shot (1:33:26 - 1:35:50) is a single long tracking shot. The camera moves down the apartment's central corridor, panning deliberately so that the viewer reviews Eurydice as it were in three discrete flashbacks from within the film. The film's other billed actress (Nike Triadafillidi, as Vera), appears twice in the sequence as well — sitting at the dining table in her vinyl slicker, then a minute later behind the shower curtain as a Eurydicean body-double. The shot requires from Tschekowa herself a breathless sprint against the camera's tracking and four costume changes in a scant two minutes. Watched at 1/10th time, the film reveals no splicing. More than an epilogue, the orchestrated scene thematically manifests Eurydice's passage from the flat's frightened defendant into its dread governess. In these closing frames, the (male) camera replicates Orpheus' retrospection and culminates in gaze back down the corridor at Eurydice. She crosses her arms to show that she is comfortable here in this place that she has won for herself.

Besides crafting one of the most engaging Eurydice adaptations since Offenbach's *Orphée aux Enfers* (1858), *Eurydice BA2037* comments upon a remarkable moment in cinematic history that now in 2020, four decades removed, rewards renewed contemplation. The historical background of the film involves the Junta of the Colonels that controlled Greece from 1967 until its demise in 1974. The national conservatism of the Colonels' regime gravely debilitated the Greek film industry through censorship. During the Junta the Greek cinematic climate witnessed an increase in viewers of "high art films" but also of "low art films" simultaneously, "a cultural climate promulgated by the military dictatorship that generated fans who expended their energies either quietly waiting in line to see a high art film or holding candlelight parades to see a pornographic film." (Constanidis 2) The Colonels' demise brought new life in Nikolaides, Panayiotopoulos, and others, even the emergence of NEK. Though it lagged chronologically

behind the *nouvelle vague* of French and essentially every other European national cinema, NEK was poised to spring when the Colonels fell in 1974. And Nikolaides' film was essentially one of the first contestants out of the gate running on a clear track. Already in November 1975, when *Eurydike BA2037* premiered at the Thessaloniki Film Festival and won the prize for Best Director, Nikolaides was guiding the national cinema down a course paced by international peers.

Contrary to those centuries-old tellings of the Orpheus myth where an illadvised gaze ruins the heroic rescue mission Orpheus had in mind, Nikolaides focuses on a different facet of the story. Eurydice's. This Eurydice liberates herself from her oppressive lover in the only narrative camera scene shot outside the flat. Late in the film, Eurydice and Orpheus stand waist-deep in a lake as an ample rainstorm showers upon their passionate embrace. Eurydice receives these advances from her lover in a surprising way. Not only the viewer's but especially Orpheus' astonishment at Eurydice's boldly erotic response is so palpable that Nikolaides repeats the astonishment thrice. Each repetition in this brief montage is a unique shot, repeated three times for narrative completeness. Then, after a quick cinematic cut, the mood in Eurydice's mind changes suddenly. All smiles now and emergent from her fallen lover's repression, the self-emancipated Eurydice performs a chillingly gleeful lustration of her flat and purges thereby *her* realm of all traces of Orpheus' influence. Therefore, as the camera gazes back one last time down the corridor in the film's final frames, the viewer performs the retrospection with cool disregard such as no Eurydice has ever done before. Abiding so powerfully in a pacified world with a newly liberated woman is particularly refreshing.

Works Cited

- Bordwell, D. and K. Thompson. 2010. *Film Art: an introduction*. 9th edition. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Constantinidis, Stratos E. 2000. "Greek Film and the National Interest: a brief preface," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 18:1-12. doi: 10.1353/mgs.2000.0004.
- Karalis, Vrasidas. 2012. *A History of Greek Cinema*. New York: Continuum.
- Michelakis, Pantelis. 2013. *Greek Tragedy on Screen*. Classical Presences. Oxford University Press.
- Shuster, Mel. 1979. *The Contemporary Greek Cinema*. London: Scarecrow.
- Soldatos, Gianni. 1982. *ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑ ΤΟΥ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟΥ ΚΙΝΗΜΑΤΟΓΡΑΦΟΥ= History of Greek Cinema*. 5th edition. 5 volumes. Athens: Aigokeros.